

PROGRESS
THE ▲ TRE



19 - 24 June 2023
www.progresstheatre.co.uk



The **Silence** *of the* **Sea**

By Vercors. Adapted by Peter Cheeseman. Directed by Dorothy Gibert.

Welcome to Progress!

Founded in 1946,
we're the oldest producing
theatre in Reading.


A self-governing, self-funding theatre group, run entirely by volunteers. We are members of the Little Theatre Guild and the National Operatic and Dramatic Association, and are a registered charity in England (no. 1182798). Our patron is Sir Kenneth Branagh.





The artwork on display in the foyer was created by Emily Gillmor


Emily Gillmor draws inspiration from her kitchen in the winter and moves outdoors as the weather improves. She produces careful, confident line drawings and translates these into gorgeous, vibrant screen prints, retaining the strong line from her drawings. All her work demonstrates a love of line and an interest in pattern. Occasionally the family cat makes an appearance! Emily grew up in Reading before studying Drawing, Painting and Printmaking at Edinburgh College of Art. She stayed in Scotland for twelve years, was a member of the Edinburgh Printmakers Workshop and lived in both Edinburgh and Glasgow. After five years living in Moscow, Emily is back in Reading with her children and teaches printmaking at the university.

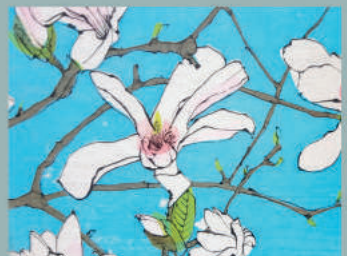


 emilygillmor@gmail.com

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11 Shows per year

We put together a varied and challenging programme of shows every season, including our traditional Open Air Shakespeare production at Reading Abbey Ruins each Summer.



An Intimate Venue

Our intimate 96 seat venue has a fully licensed bar. There is wheelchair access and a hearing loop, and we are committed to making further improvements in the coming years to make our building more accessible.



Youth Theatre

We have a vibrant and happy Youth Theatre, split into 4 groups by age. Regular workshops involve theatre games, improvisations and skills development. Youth Theatre shows are often challenging and always performed to a high standard. Many past members maintain an interest in theatre and numerous aspects of performance art as adults, some of them professionally!



Award Winners

In June 2020, we were very honoured to receive the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

This award is equivalent to an MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire), and is the highest award given to volunteer groups across the UK, to recognise outstanding work done in their own communities.

Director's Notes

At the tender age of 21 I had the privilege to see Peter Cheeseman's adaptation of Vercors' Resistance novel *Le Silence de la Mer* at the Victoria Theatre in Hanley. For those of you who aren't acquainted with this venue, it was and is that rarest of beasts, a theatre entirely in the round. Known affectionately as The Vic Theatre in those days, it was an inspiring place, where living playwrights including Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Plater, Peter Terson, Henry Livings, Michael Stott, Tony Perrin and Ken Campbell were delighted to premier their works. It was an exciting place to go and it was there that my love of theatre began.

I remember how thrilled I was with *The Silence of the Sea*, so much so that I went back to see it twice and it has stayed with me all my life. They say that theatre is an ephemeral form but a great production never dies in





our minds. When I returned to the UK in 2011 I immediately thought of the possibility of directing this wonderful play, only to find that the version I loved doesn't exist. It has never been published, it has never been performed since that superb production in 1976. What to do?

I wrote to the Victoria Theatre and there began a collaboration with Romy Cheeseman, Peter's widow, who works on the archives in the university and was then gradually digitizing all the earlier material. She promised to let me know when *The Silence of the Sea* was ready, which turned out to be several years later. This means

that our production is the only one of this adaptation ever to have been performed since its premier in 1976. I feel very privileged to have been allowed to bring it to our stage in Reading, and to have the full support of Romy Cheeseman and the blessing of Vercors' son.

I can only hope that you, like me, will be moved beyond words by this poignant story of sensitive, complex human beings trapped within the mindless brutalities of war. It seems very topical these days - but then, isn't it always?



Dorothy Gibert

June 2023

Cast

The Uncle Gareth Saunders

The German Officer Leo Burke

The Niece Hanna Proskura

Production Team

Director Dorothy Gibert

Producer Marie French

Stage Manager Fiona McNeil

Lighting Design & Operation Jon Churchill

Sound Design & Operation Richard Saunders

Costumes Helen Wernham

Marketing Marie French & Emily Goode

Photography Riccardo Mancuso & Marie French

Musical composition Denis Versmee

Special Thanks

Chris Moran, without whom we would not have found our German Officer
Elena Dee who kindly allowed us to record her on the piano
Jane Waddell and the whole wardrobe team for their stellar costume work
Richard Saunders for building us a harmonium

The 1976 Production



Photo: Chris Rushton, 1976. Bruce Alexander and Jenny Howe as the German Officer and the Niece.

English theatre director Peter Cheeseman was a young boy at the outbreak of the Second World War. Hiding under his bed during the nightly bombing raids over Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Peter wondered whether he and his sister would be alive the next morning. As a teenager, he experienced the shocking film images of the liberation of the Nazi prison camps. Years later, when interviewing surviving prisoners of war for a documentary play, he began to question how he would have personally reacted under a Nazi Occupation.

Reading accounts of the war-time Resistance Movement led him to discover the extraordinary history of Les Editions de Minuit and the eloquence of *Le Silence de La Mer*.

With kind permission from author Jean Bruller (Vercors) and armed with a hefty French dictionary, Peter Cheeseman set about translating and adapting the story for production at the Victoria Theatre Stoke-on-Trent in 1976. It is a remarkable fact that director Dorothy Gibert saw that same production as a student, the memory of which inspired her to track down the script and create this new production to be shared with a new generation. Such is the power of storytelling through drama.



Photo: Chris Rushton, 1976. Jim Wiggins and Bruce Alexander as the Uncle and the German Officer.

Romy Cheeseman - *Honorary Curator, Victoria Theatre Archive, Staffordshire University*

Vercors & The Resistance

The Silence of the Sea was written by Jean Bruller, the son of Hungarian immigrants, who was born and raised in Paris. He was essentially a humorist and artist and brought out his first comic book in 1926.

Meanwhile in the background the shadow of fascism was beginning to darken the horizons of Europe. Soon France was under Nazi occupation. When Jean went home to his house about an hour outside Paris, it was to find that a German officer had been billeted there. The young soldier was polite, but Jean rebelled. He demonstrated his resistance by refusing to engage with the man. Jean found this stressful, because he was naturally an outgoing person who hated to be rude. Jean's experience here is the basis for the story he was to write.

Jean was determined not to publish anything under German rule. He stopped all his sketching and illustrating. The sight of his friends collaborating filled him with despair.



While the Germans were beginning to ban books and newspapers and to exercise severe censorship, Jean believed that clandestine publications were the only hope. In March 1941 he was shown a secret brochure called *La Pensee Libre* and was asked to write a story for it. Rather reluctantly, because he was not a writer, Jean set to work.

Jean Bruller, known as "Vercors", c. 1950.
Source: Association SEMER / Cercle artistique de Villiers-sur-Morin

The house from Le Silence de la Mer, in Villiers-sur-Morin, drawing by Jean Bruller.

Source: Association SEMER / Cercle artistique de Villiers-sur-Morin



It was a slow business - writing didn't come easily. This sluggishness almost certainly saved his life. In 1941 the Gestapo raided *La Pensee Libre*, destroyed all the manuscripts and arrested the typesetters. The other contributors were all arrested, tortured, and executed.

Jean and his friend Pierre Lescure decided to found a new publishing firm that they would keep small in order to avoid leaks. They found a printer who ran a tiny print shop. He could only manage 8 pages a week, so every Thursday Jean arrived with his 8 pages of manuscript to be printed. Another friend, Yvonne Paraf, agreed to do the binding - she sewed the pages in her kitchen. No one betrayed them, so their tiny company managed to survive the war. They called the publisher "Les Editions de Minuit", and a remarkable fact is that it's still a major publishing house in France today.

Charles de Gaulle ordered the publication of *The Silence of the Sea* in London. It was then republished in Switzerland, Algeria, Senegal, Australia and the USA. Vercors' work became a symbol of the Resistance. On the BBC Maurice Schumann referred to "Vercors, still unknown and already famous".

Sources: "Vercors, l'homme du silence" by Alain Riffaud, 2016, Portaparole; "Le Silence de la Mer de Vercors. Analyse de l'oeuvre." by Marie Piette, 2016. Profile Litteraire

Escape to the Chateau!

An exciting part of our project with *The Silence of the Sea* was a trip to France in May this year to perform the work in its country of origin.

Before a hugely receptive French audience our intrepid cast translated this work to the stage in the Chateau de Goutelas, a cultural centre in the Loire. This region of France was of course deeply affected by the Occupation, being located near to the line below which France was free. Much smuggling of dissenters and Jews occurred along this line and so we stirred the collective memory.

The use of the chateau was not without its challenges. We had to transform a conference room into a theatre, which we achieved with the loan of lighting equipment from a local opera house and the work of a number of technician friends. We were acting in English so the whole play had to be subtitled in French.

The local reaction was extremely gratifying: standing ovation both nights with enthusiastic long-lasting applause. One spectator wrote, "I wish we were back on May 3 so that I could watch this fabulous play again. I desperately regret that I didn't bring my children. Thanks and thanks again for this wonderful moment." Another reviewer declared, "This play was an outstanding success. I was thrilled to meet these talented, modest and honest actors. The Chateau de Goutelas was a magnificent choice of venue. Vercors' text was an astonishing rediscovery for us all."

Not bad for Progress Theatre's first foray abroad!

Dorothy Gibert & Marie French

Our cast enjoying the sights



The actors
actually had to
carry the stage
up a steep
staircase!



But what a
location for a
forbidden love
story...



Biographies

Leo Burke

The German Officer

Leo trained in musical theatre at Artemis College. His recent credits include Understudy/ Ensemble in *Cinderella* at The Arts Centre Hounslow which was nominated for three Pantomime Awards including best ensemble, best sisters and best small pantomime. Leo also recently appeared as Toby in *Posh* at the Studio Theatre. As well as acting, Leo is also a director, having directed *Corner Shop Sweets* at the Studio Theatre and *Toothpaste Kisses* which is touring the south of England.



Jon Churchill

Lighting Design & Operation

Jon has been lighting shows at Progress for many years, most recently *The Welkin*, *Jeeves & Wooster*, *Dark Sublime*, *Radiant Vermin* and *Wyrd Sisters* including the flaming torches and flying witch! Previous memorable shows also include *Birdsong*, *The 39 Steps*, *The Little Shop of Horrors* and *Not About Heroes* in addition to the candle lit atmosphere of *Masquerade*, and the neon sign in *Top Girls*. Jon has also seen past duty on the Progress Management Committee as a Trustee, Theatre Secretary and Theatre Manager.

Marie French

Producer

Marie has been a member of Progress Theatre for 9 years now, taking part both on and off stage. She first trod the boards as the cheeky maid in *Gaslight* in 2015, and made two further appearances as a fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Anne Brontë in *Brontë*. She was Marketing Manager for *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*. She worked for years on the management committee, as a fundraiser for our car park, assistant marketing manager in charge of posters and flyers, and chair of the theatre. This is her first stint as producer.

Dorothy Gibert

Director

Dorothy joined Progress Theatre in 2012 after returning from a lifetime teaching English in France.

She had been a keen actress in her youth and had done some directing in France, so she was delighted to be able to find a dynamic theatre company to get involved in.

She co-directed *A Midsummernight's Dream* in Caversham Court Gardens in 2016, dabbled in some *WriteFest* productions, and even trod the boards again in *Murder, Margaret and Me* directed by Kate Shaw in 2017.

Now she dons her director's cap once more for this quiet, intimate play about love and loss in wartime.

Fiona McNeill

Stage Manager

Fiona has been a member of Progress for many years now, turning a hand to most things around the theatre, other than actually appearing on stage and saying lines. Backstage this show will once again have the whole cast on stage for most of the time, but unlike *The Welkin* recently where we juggled 16 into our limited space, this production has just three, so it's luxury.

Just don't ask Fiona to hang any more black curtains on the stage!



Hanna Proskura

The Niece

Hanna was born in the Luhansk region of Ukraine and graduated from the Luhansk Academy of Arts in 2021. She starred in *Dybbuk* by Semen An-skyi and the mono-play *Natasha's Dream* by Yaroslava Pulinovych. Hanna taught acting at the local secondary school. When war broke out, she was in Kyiv and fled with her family to Uzhgorod. There she volunteered, giving acting lessons to children affected by the war. She came to England in September. To her, England is a place where she need not live in fear that a siren will sound in the middle of the night and send her running to a makeshift bomb shelter in the basement. Since the beginning of the war, she takes nothing for granted: she lives for every day.

Hanna feels for her heroine, whose forbidden love for a member of the most vilified order of the 20th Century goes against both her own judgment and that of society. She sees beyond the monster to the soul of a man who should have led a different life, a life which, in a better world, she could have shared with him.



Gareth Saunders

The Uncle

Gareth was born in Newcastle upon Tyne to Welsh parents and moved to South Wales near Cardiff when he was six. His love of acting originally comes from watching his mother on stage who was a professional actress. He later discovered that he had inherited his innate passion for the stage from her and was cast in the lead role in his first play in a local Reading Theatre (Woodley) as a psychopathic Welsh murderer in *Night Must Fall*. He has since played Charles in *Blithe Spirit* twice, Siegfried Sassoon in the WWI play *Not About Heroes* and both Jekyll and Hyde in the eponymous play along with numerous other parts over the last 32 years.



Richard Saunders

Sound

Richard has been a member of Progress Theatre for over ten years. In that time he has designed the sound for many productions including *Bold Girls*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *Blithe Spirit* and six *WriteFests*. He is part of the tech team that supports music events at Progress, particularly Jazz in Reading, and has been the Technical Director for five outdoor Shakespeare productions, most recently at Reading Abbey Ruins.

Helen Wernham

Costumes

Helen has been a member of Progress Theatre since 2000 and has been known to tread the boards, particularly in the Open-Air Shakespeare in the Ruins. She directed *Colder Than Here* in 2013, *Happy Jack* in 2018 and has been assistant director and producer for other shows, *Blue Orange*, *Blackbird* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 2015. She has been costuming shows for the last 15 years and enjoys sourcing for period plays. Costuming *Romeo and Juliet* in the ruins as we emerged from Covid in 2021 was a particular challenge as was finding multiple costumes for *Angels in America* in 2022. The main challenge in *The Silence of the Sea* was the German officer's uniform but there are very good uniform specialists out there. Helen is also Little Theatre Guild rep for the theatre.



Occupied France

"In the occupied region of France, the German Reich exercises all of the rights of an occupying power. The French government undertakes to facilitate in every way possible the implementation of these rights, and to provide the assistance of the French administrative services to that end. The French government will immediately direct all officials and administrators of the occupied territory to comply with the regulations of, and to collaborate fully with, the German military authorities."

Source: *La convention d'armistice*, mjp.univ-perp.fr, accessed 13 June 2023



"Map of Vichy France". Author: Rotislav Botev.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vichy_France_Map.jpg

Credits for the Film

BArch, Bild 146-1975-017-08 / o.Ang.
BArch, Bild 101III-Peterseim-039-05 / o.Ang.
BArch, Bild 183-1985-1216-524 / o.Ang.
BArch, Bild 146-1994-036-09A / o.Ang.
BArch, Bild 183-H28708 / Hoffmann Heinrich
BArch, Bild 146-1975-041-07 / o.Ang.
BArch, Bild 101I-751-0067-34 / Kropf, Otto
BArch, Bild 101I-247-0775-38 / Langhaus
BArch, Bild 183-L05487 / Folkerts
BArch, Bild 101I-126-0350-26A / Fremke, Heinz

German officers and Parisians mingle on the Champs-Élysées on Bastille Day in 1940. Photograph: Chas. Source: Bettmann Archive (Baulard/Bettmann/CORBIS)

"Der Führer in Paris". Photo by Heinrich Hoffmann. Source: Galerie Bilderwelt/Gett

German troops marching near Arc of Triumph, during the Nazi occupation of Paris. Summer 1940, World War 2 (BSLOC_2015_13_79), Courtesy Everett Collection, HISL040 EC374. Source: Alamy

Suzanne Fleuriste, photograph by Alexandre Trauner, Paris circa 1940
German troops parading through Warsaw, Poland, in September 1939;
Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

OCCUPIED PARIS, FRANCE 1940 GERMAN 16mm HOME MOVIE HOTEL MAJESTIC HEADQUARTERS (SILENT) XD13634. Source: Periscope Films

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2022/23

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LTG Rep

Helen Wernham

PPC

Sahar Hemami

Liz Paulo

Peter Knightley

Thomas Ripper

Mark Taylor

Digital Theatre

Aidan Moran

Tony Travis

Archivist

Daniel Clarke

Our 76th Season

2022

2 - 10 SEPTEMBER

Jeeves & Wooster in Perfect Nonsense by P.G. Wodehouse, adapted by the Goodale Brothers

10 - 15 OCTOBER

The Pride by Alexi Kaye Campbell

2 - 5 NOVEMBER

The 16th Annual Writefest

16 - 19 NOVEMBER

Progress Premieres presents *Liar's Teeth* by Emily Goode

7 - 10 DECEMBER

Life is a Dream by Pedro Calderon, translated by Rhys Lawton

PROGRESS
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2023

20 - 28 JANUARY

The Welkin by Lucy Kirkwood

3 - 11 MARCH

Lonesome West by Martin McDonagh

29 MARCH - 1 APRIL

TBC

PROGRESS
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14 - 22 APRIL

Dinner by Moira Buffini

19 - 27 MAY

Silver Lining by Sandi Toksvig

19 - 24 JUNE

The Silence of the Sea by Paul Vercors, adapted by Peter Cheeseman

12 - 22 JULY

Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare
Open Air at the Abbey Ruins

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